

hard life to love

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Summary

Billy lets go of him at once, comprehension dawning. "You got your ass beat."

Eddie manages to gather himself and he turns to the side to spit out the blood and saliva that just flooded his mouth. "Yep," he says bitterly.

"Who?"

Notes

yes i did write this instead of doing my job this afternoon, i cannot help myself.

title from black sabbath

Eddie did *know* it was a stupid idea. Well, he knows now. He'd sort of *suspected* before but he'd kind of convinced himself he was being paranoid and, well. Turns out paranoia pays off sometimes. Or, it would have paid off if he'd listened to it. Instead he's crouched in a dirty alley, patiently spitting out blood until it stops flooding his mouth, cradling his wrist against his chest.

It's a pretty shitty state of affairs, all things considered.

His wrist really fucking hurts. Like, a lot. It's almost a good thing because it stops him from focusing on all the other parts of him that hurt, of which there are many. His eye's definitely gonna swell up into an ugly shade of puffy puce that's gonna make people ask questions and Eddie doesn't think there's an acceptable way to say 'I was trying to buy drugs from a different dealer to my usual guy and his asshole friends jumped me on the way home'.

It just sounds bad all round.

Eddie's never actually been mugged before so the whole thing is taking some getting used to. But does it count as a real mugging if you're pretty sure the beating was as a direct result not of having hoards of valuable objects on his out-numbered person, but because the dicks had sussed him out as gay from the moment he saw him? And the real kick in the teeth is that the *reason* they knew was because one of them had seen Eddie in a gay bar.

The fucking hypocrisy stings almost as much as the rest of him.

Of course he hadn't told his friends exactly how he knew Eddie was *like that*, but Eddie had recognised him from Olly's where, sure, Eddie's maybe kissed a boy or two but actually the reason he likes that place is their karaoke nights. Regardless, they've both been in the same gay bar before and Eddie *knows* Andrew's friend has kissed his fair share of boys there, too, but do you see Eddie kicking the shit out of him for it?

He groans as he tries to shift into a more comfortable position, of which there are none. There is no way to crouch here in this alley, amongst the bulging trash bags and puddles of watery garbage juice, that doesn't hurt.

Honestly, it's kind of hard not to have a cry about the whole thing. Eddie's trying not to. It's not going to help any. But fuck sake, he really does hurt all over and it's just not *fair* and it makes him mad, it makes him really fucking mad, but he can't *do* anything about it but sit here like he's just another sack of rubbish and wait for the pain to recede enough that he can walk home.

Yeah, walk home, 'cause those fuckers took not only the drugs he'd just bought from Andrew (so he's already four hundred bucks out) but also the keys to his van before they left him there.

Eddie has no idea how long it is before he drags himself upright. His knee twinges horribly as he puts weight on it and, much as he'd like to walk back to Hawkins with his head held high, he winds up shuffling his way out to the street, slowly and laboriously.

He has to stop after a single block to lean on a wall and catch his breath. His wrist pulses hot, localized shockwaves of pain around a rapidly-bruising epicenter and the rest of him barely fares any better. It's a long walk, too.

Still, nothing for it but one foot in front of the other. Eddie tries to think of it like a quest or something, tries to imagine himself in some other situation that would make this journey brave and powerful like heroes in a campaign, but at the end of the day he's just a teenager limping home and fighting off tears. It's not exactly heroic.

He's been walking about twenty minutes and the 'Welcome to Hawkins!' sign has just become visible up ahead when the Camaro comes roaring down the road in the opposite direction.

Eddie doesn't actually register the familiar car at first; he just moves aside so he doesn't get run over to top his entire shitty day off, but he does look over when the car doesn't drive past him.

Well, it does. It shoots past like the police are on its tail but, a few yards past Eddie, screeches to a sudden halt that leaves the smell of scorched rubber in the air.

Eddie freezes.

Billy kicks the door open and rises from the driver's seat with a scowl already in place.

"Munson?" he asks. He sounds pissed off, like Eddie's being here is a massive inconvenience to him, as if Eddie had *made* him stop when all Eddie wants is to be left the fuck alone so he can struggle on back to town and swallow as many pills as he can get his hands on.

"Sure is," Eddie replies flatly. "I really don't have the time, Hargrove, so..." He shuffles onward, determinedly, but he's not at all surprised when Billy comes round the car and stops in front of him, staring at him in that unsettling, intense way he has.

"The fuck happened to you?"

Eddie does hold his head high, then. He doesn't know why; it's not like Billy's the one who wailed on him. But Billy's just like them, isn't he? He hates Eddie for what he is, hates him even when Eddie has his mouth on his cock, and Eddie can't be mad because Billy's really hot and Eddie *likes* fooling around with him but, at the end of the day, Billy's just another homophobe who'd as quickly leave Eddie bleeding in the dirt as Andrew's pals from earlier.

So all of the anger Eddie'd wanted and needed earlier suddenly swells up inside him and he scoffs. "What happened to me is guys like *you* who hate guys like *me*."

The outburst has the unexpected effect of surprising Billy enough that the scowl slips from his face, becomes a frown instead.

"What? The fuck's that supposed to mean?"

"You know exactly what I mean," Eddie tells him. He steps to the side, meaning to breeze past Billy and continue marching back to Hawkins, but Billy grabs his arm to stop him and Eddie lets out a cry before he can help it. The road ahead and Billy's leather-clad shoulder all go black as his vision fails him for a moment and Eddie chokes as he tries to catch his breath.

Billy lets go of him at once, comprehension dawning. "You got your ass beat."

Eddie manages to gather himself and he turns to the side to spit out the blood and saliva that just flooded his mouth. "Yep," he says bitterly.

"Who?" Billy's question is sharp and sudden, it comes from between his teeth.

"Does it matter who?" Eddie replies. The anger and bitterness is already gone; it's too exhausting to hold onto it when his body is just made up of hurting just then. "Guys like everyone else in this fucking place. Guys like *you*."

"If I'd gone after you, Munson, you wouldn't be walking your sorry ass home right now," Billy tells him. "You'd be face-down in whatever fucking alley I left you in. Who did it?" he demands.

Eddie spits again. His mouth tastes metallic and his tooth presses into his cheek in a way that he knows it shouldn't. He just wants to go home and it's clear Billy's not about to move his bulk from Eddie's path until he tells him.

"The only one I know's called Pete," Eddie relents.

Billy's frown returns. "Reynolds?"

"No, not from school. Think he goes to Purdue, he's Andrew Derby's friend."

"Andrew Derby," Billy repeats. "I know that guy."

Eddie is unsurprised. "It wasn't him. I was...visiting him."

"Buying shit," Billy supplies.

Eddie nods, then stops because it makes him hurt. "His friends didn't like the look of me, apparently. Too fruity for them." Eddie gives a big, sarcastic grin. "Sound familiar?"

He tries to step around Billy again but immediately wishes he hadn't; Billy stops him at once, seizing his arm, and this time he doesn't let go even when Eddie gives a sharp gasp of pain.

"You're hurting me, Hargrove," he grits out.

"No shit," Billy says bluntly, "that wrist's *broken*, you moron. You gonna walk all the way to the hospital like this?"

"Gonna walk all the way *home* like this," Eddie retorts defiantly.

"Don't be an idiot, Munson," Billy says, finally letting go of him and yanking open the door of his car. "You need that in a cast. Trust me," he adds darkly.

Eddie doesn't move. "I can't. I don't have insurance. My uncle's friend is a nurse, she can—"

"Just *get in*," Billy says impatiently, giving him a light shove. "I have insurance."

Eddie, sensing he's going to get a harder shove if he doesn't comply, gets in, albeit confused. The door slams shut behind him, just barely missing his foot, and Eddie's alone in the quiet of Billy's Camaro for the seconds it takes him to walk around to the driver's side. It's pristine inside and smells strongly of Billy's cologne, like he's only just recently sprayed it.

He brings a fresh waft of it with him when he gets inside, the leather seat creaking as he settles into his spot, and Eddie finds himself taking a deep breath in; it's nice stuff.

Billy's dressed nice, too; not the usual beaten old jeans Eddie's used to seeing him in but a slightly darker pair, nice boots and a button-up. His necklace glints on his chest as he turns to plant a hand on the back of Eddie's head-rest, turning the car around to head back into Hawkins.

"So," Billy says as they drive back into the town's limits. "Purdue guys, huh?"

"Probably," Eddie says. "Andrew definitely goes there."

"They got you good," Billy comments. Unnecessarily, really, since Eddie, who was on the receiving end of the whole thing, is painfully aware of just how good they got him. "You gonna go to the cops?"

Eddie snorts. "And say what?" he asks, staring out the window as trees slide by. Billy's not taking the roads at break-neck speed, at least, though Eddie winces as he swerves to avoid a pot-hole and his wrist twinges sickeningly. "If I tell them they stole my shit, they're gonna find out I was buying drugs. If I tell them they jumped me, they're gonna find out why and they'll probably jump me, too."

“They stole the drugs?”

“Yep,” Eddie says. He wishes he didn’t care about that—he’s alive, after all, and he ought to be grateful—but he does. That was a lot of money and he doesn’t have cash to throw around like that, he doesn’t know what the fuck he’s gonna do when his regulars show up wanting their shit. “And my keys. Even my *rings*.” That actually hurts more than anything, Eddie thinks, but he doesn’t want to think about it or he really might start crying and if crying would’ve been bad before, in Billy Hargrove’s car it would be an act of suicide.

He feels Billy glance over, down at his hands, but he doesn’t say anything else and Eddie rests his head against the window as they drive through town. Exhaustion is starting to creep up on him and he has to fight off the shakes as shock begins to set in.

That’s probably why it takes him such a long time to realize Billy’s not driving the route to Hawkins Memorial Hospital.

“Where are we going?” he asks.

Billy barely spares him a glance, eyes on the road. “They know me at Hawkins,” he says shortly. “At Marion General you can use my insurance.”

Eddie turns to ask him why the fuck he’s doing this but Billy prevents any further conversation by turning the dial on his radio, blasting music so loud the doors buzz.

It’s not a long drive to Marion but it feels longer through the silence between them, and longer still with the way Eddie’s body seems to hurt more and more with every minute that passes. He thinks he might crack another tooth, he’s gritting them so hard by the time they pull up at the ER entrance.

Billy leaves his car where it stops, splayed haphazardly over painted lines, and gets out. He beats Eddie, fumbling to get out of his seatbelt without jolting his arm too badly, to the passenger-side door and opens it, jerking his head impatiently.

Eddie carefully gets to his feet but hesitates before walking after Billy to the entrance. “What do I say?” he hisses.

Billy turns back to him. “Football practice,” he advises boredly. “They won’t bother asking questions. Places like this never do.”

Eddie frowns but Billy’s disappearing inside before he can ask what makes him think that, leaving Eddie to hurry after him.

He struggles with the door for a few seconds, working it open with his shoulder, so Billy’s already crossed the room by the time Eddie makes it inside. Except Eddie’s almost not sure it *is* Billy because the guy leaning over the front desk and flashing a cheeky smile at the receptionist isn’t the Billy Hargrove Eddie knows.

Even his voice is different, softer, sweeter, as he rests his head on his hand, elbow on the desk, charms turned up to eleven.

“—beautiful woman such as yourself should be out dancing, not wasting her evening in here,” Billy’s saying as Eddie comes to lurk behind him. “Especially with how busy this place is. Do you get a coffee break?” he adds, smiling through his lashes.

It’s actually kind of creepy. Eddie has to stop himself from staring at Billy in horror. And, he can

admit privately, a bit of offense; did Billy seriously drive him all the way here just to chat up a fucking receptionist right in front of him?

“Ooh, I wish,” the woman laughs, blushing under Billy’s attention.

“So I have to wait ‘til the end of your shift to get a drink with you?” Billy asks. He actually pouts. Fucking *pouts*. It’s strange enough to distract Eddie from the pain in his arm a tiny bit, though it’s so fucking weird he’s not sure if it’s any better.

“Oh, you!” the receptionist says, giggling as she pretends to swat at him.

“Go on,” Billy coaxes. “What time do you finish? Indulge me.”

She glances over at her co-worker, who isn’t paying any of them the slightest bit of attention, and bites her lip. “Midnight,” she admits, hastily scribbling her number on a scrap of paper and sliding it over to Billy.

Billy takes it and gives it a little kiss before he pockets it with a wink. “You’ve made my day, darling,” he tells her. “But I wonder if you can make it even better? My friend here, he’s had a rough football practice,” Billy explains, indicating Eddie. “I’d really love to get him seen before you finish up, is there *any* way you could help us out?”

“Oh, you poor thing,” she says, shooting Eddie a sympathetic glance for all of one second before her eyes are back on Billy. “Let me see what I can do. Does he have insurance?”

“Yep,” Billy says, taking the forms she hands over to him before she tells them to take a seat for a few minutes while she ‘works her magic’. Billy even blows her a kiss as they walk away.

“What the hell, Hargrove?” Eddie mutters as they sit down, Billy balancing the clipboard with the forms on his knee as he starts writing.

“What?” Billy asks, unashamed. “You’ll get in quicker like this. Shut up, I need to focus.”

Eddie watches as Billy scribbles away, filling out names and numbers he apparently knows by rote before he gets up to hand them back. Eddie waits in his seat as Billy flirts with the receptionist some more, but he doesn’t have to wait long; it can’t be more than five minutes after Billy’s handed the documents over when a doctor appears and calls out, ‘William Hargrove?’.

“See?” Billy mutters triumphantly, rejoining Eddie and pointing him in the direction of the doctor. “Remember your name’s William now. Don’t fuck this up for me, Munson.”

“Yeah, I got it,” Eddie says, quickly trying to recover himself because he had—stupidly—thought that Billy would come through with him while the doctors did their thing, but he’s getting ready to leave.

Eddie gives himself a slight shake before he follows the doctor, turning back before they disappear into the hospital proper, expecting to see Billy hanging out by the receptionist again. But he’s not; he’s walking straight to the exit, shoulders square, and, just before Eddie’s out of sight, he sees Billy toss the little scrap of paper in the trash without a backward glance.

Yeah, his wrist is broken. Eddie sort of feels like they didn't need an x-ray to confirm that, but whatever. At least they've given him painkillers now; they haven't taken the pain away entirely but, fucking hell, it's like paradise compared to before. Turns out his nose is fractured, too, and he has some deep-tissue bruising that's going to take weeks to heal. He has a referral to a dentist to sort out his tooth, which has been knocked loose, but the doctors say they think it can be saved if he gets seen quickly enough.

Eddie listens to the laundry list in a sort of daze, watching nurses patch up the cuts and look over the bruises, eyes watering as they check that his airway isn't compromised by the injury to his nose. Thankfully, he escapes the humiliation of having it splinted, though his arm gets wrapped up in plaster and they bind it to his chest with a sling.

The worst of all of it is when they tell him they want to keep him overnight for observation. He doesn't have a concussion but he does have a pounding headache, which he suspects is an innocent byproduct of the glaring hospital lights rather than something more sinister. He tries to explain this but nobody seems very inclined to listen and Eddie winds up perched on a bed in a little cubicle, tired and aching and wishing he was home. The trailer's no mansion, doesn't boast any luxuries, but it's *home* and Eddie wants his own bed, his own pillow, his favorite coffee cup. He wants to be able to hold onto his guitar, even if he can't play it, for the comfort of it.

Right now, in this strange place surrounded by people coughing and groaning and snoring, he feels so alone it almost makes him feel sick. Every time he closes his eyes he sees the jeering faces of people who hate him, feels the lurch in his stomach as if they've grabbed him all over again.

Eddie keeps his eyes open.

It's late when the door opens. The clock on the wall says it's nearly two in the morning, though Eddie's yet to sleep.

He turns, expecting to see another doctor, and starts in shock.

It's Billy.

For all Eddie's exhausted, Billy looks wired. His eyes are wide and bright and his hair's a tangled mess. There are buttons missing on his shirt and, when he steps closer, Eddie can see the shadow of a new bruise on his chin.

"What the hell happened to you?" he asks hoarsely.

When Billy smirks, there's blood in his teeth. This is the Billy Eddie likes; not when he's being a strange, sweet version of himself, charming and flirtatious, but when he's a bit scary and his hands are just a second away from curling into fists and just being with him feels dangerous.

Instead of replying, Billy pulls his hand from his jacket pocket, holding his fist out over Eddie's side-table. His knuckles are bruised, blood dried in the whorls of his skin.

When he opens his hand, Eddie's stolen rings go scattering across the table like dice.

Billy stares him down for a long, long moment. "I'm not like them."

Eddie can't say anything at first, too stunned to speak. He picks up one of the rings and turns it over, rubbing off a smear of blood with his thumb. He doesn't know if it's theirs or his or Billy's. Doesn't matter.

He slips it on, easing it along his finger. It makes him feel, instantly, a million times better, less like a stranger all bandaged up in gauze and plaster.

"No," he replies quietly, after a long time. "You're not, are you?"

Billy doesn't respond to that. He turns away, uncharacteristically awkward, and Eddie busies himself putting the rest of his rings back on.

"They said they gotta keep you overnight," Billy says gruffly.

Eddie makes a face, then grits his teeth because it hurts his nose. "Yeah, I tried to leave but they won't let me."

Billy turns back to him. "You wanna get out of here?"

"Obviously," Eddie says. "I hate it here, I want to go home."

Billy nods. "Then let's go," he says simply.

Eddie pauses. "Can we?"

Billy's mouth curls again, still bloody. "Munson," he says, pulling out Eddie's van keys and several baggies Eddie recognises with another start. "We can do whatever the fuck we want. And if anyone has a problem with that, I'll fucking deal with it. Alright?"

Eddie slides out of bed, nodding slowly. "Yeah," he says. He believes it, actually. "Alright."

In the end, nobody questions them anyway; they walk straight out the door, to Billy's waiting car, without a single person so much as cocking an eyebrow their way.

Billy cranks the music up again, heedless of anyone sleeping nearby, and they don't talk the entire way but Eddie's head lolls against the window and, for the first time in hours, closes his eyes without flinching.